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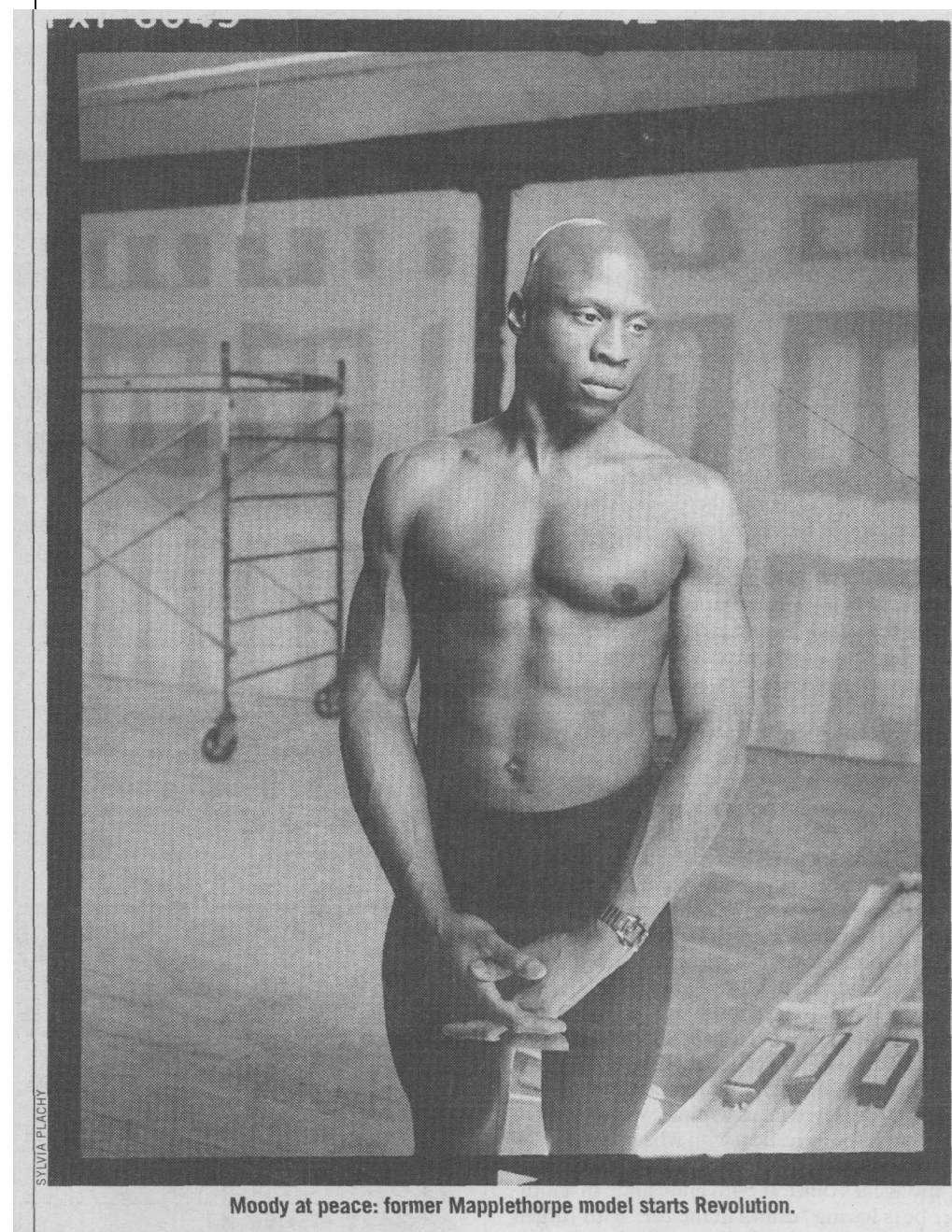
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NO MUSIC,

NO HAIR



Moody at peace: former Mapplethorpe model starts Revolution.

IN KEN MOODY'S EXERCISE CLASS, LESS IS MORE

By Mark Schoofs "You know what they used to call girl push-ups?" exercise instructor Ken Moody asks. "That's when you do push-ups on your knees instead of your toes. Well, most of the women in my class do toe push-ups. I have 60-year-old women doing 40 perfect military push-ups—no locking joints, back straight, neck extended. *Beautiful* push-ups, and these are 60-year-old women! I hear a lot of guys say they do 50 or 100 push-ups, and I always think, 'I'd like to see *those* push-ups.'"

Moody can rhapsodize about the simplest bodily movement—raising a leg, curling the back, sitting up tall with the head centered right on top of the neck. That's

why he plays no music in his class. None. "There is no beat to distract you from the heat of an intense muscle contraction," he says. "You just have to be there with that heat."

Shockingly, people love this. He's recorded his class on audiotape so people who have to leave town won't suffer withdrawal. "I took Kenny's tape to the Arctic, the Antarctic, and the Amazon," says one of his students, photographer Julie Maris/Semel. Tony Rodrigues, fitness director of the chic midtown Manhattan Plaza Health Club, says Moody's "Strength and Alignment" is the club's most popular class—ever. This summer, the 36-year-old began offering it at Revolution, an exercise studio at 104 West 14th Street not to be confused with a gym. Revolution's main assets are not weights or machines but, says Moody, "the best exercise instructors in the city" who pooled their talents and run it themselves.

Moody's on the cusp of a swelling exodus from laissez-faire gyms toward a guided approach to fitness. This reverses the trend of the '80s, when "the exercise studio just died," he says, noting that Crunch started as a fitness studio. Now, many people have injured themselves using gym machines improperly, or just gotten bored exercising alone. About a third of his students are gym refugees.

And people have grown up. Most of Moody's clients appear to be in their late thirties or older, the very generation that burned through StairMaster, Nautilus, and NordicTrack on a quest for some supposedly ideal body. "I used to hear, 'I want Bo Derek's stomach,'" Moody says. But a subtle change has occurred: "Now I'm hearing, 'I want my stomach to be a little harder.' People aren't flipping through a magazine picking out celebrity butts and stomachs and saying 'That's the body I want.' I think they're finally becoming comfortable with their physical limitations."

OF COURSE, SOME FOLKS want to emulate Moody himself, famous as one of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's most striking models. "People still ask me, 'If I do this, will I look like you?' And whenever someone says that, my stomach drops a little." But isn't his beauty why many people sign up for his class? "It's probably one of the reasons," he says, candidly. Indeed, novelist Susanna Moore, who's been taking his class for three years, says she approached him because he looked "sleek" and "like a prince."

"Being inspired to work hard by someone who looks great" is fine and dandy, Moody says. It's wanting to become another person that makes him cringe: "You could lose all your body fat and develop beautiful muscle tone, but you will always be disappointed if you want to look like somebody else."

Even if he wanted to, Moody couldn't look like anybody else. He has alopecia, a condition which makes him bald all over—he doesn't even have eyebrows. It struck when he was 12. "Afros were in then," he recalls, "and I was just starting to grow one." Forget about the stereotype of adolescents ribbing people for looking different: Moody didn't get teased until he moved here in 1979 from Kingston, his childhood home in upstate New York, to attend FIT "No one was bald, and certainly no one was as courageous as I was. I never wore a hat. I was just who I was." He laughs, "Now every second black man has a bald head."

He'd wanted to be a fashion illustrator, but by 1981 realized he wasn't going to make it. He needed money, and got a job answering phones at an exercise studio. Soon he was an instructor, and one of the members was a friend of Mapplethorpe. Moody had done a handful of shoots: "Photographers were constantly stopping me—and still do," he says. "When it got

too annoying, I thought I should make money on it." But it was Mapplethorpe who catapulted him into the pages of *Italian Vogue*.

Did he like Mapplethorpe? "Not really." Noting that Mapplethorpe wouldn't talk "even at a dinner party," Moody says, "I don't trust people who are too quiet." The photographer didn't click with Moody, either. "My physical image worked for him, but not my personality. He expected me to be more street—'cause that rang his bell—but I'm not street. I'm the farthest thing from street." Mapplethorpe's famous fetish for stereotyped black men was extreme, but people often "expect me to be harder, more butch," observes Moody. "I'm softer than they think I'll be." How does he cope with these preconceptions? "I probably choose not to notice it. I've spent my whole life being different."

"MODELING IS EASY," SAYS Moody. "But except for the travel and money, there's no real satisfaction in it. But helping someone to understand that they drop their chest so that they come back to you measuring three-quarters of an inch taller—wow! That's satisfying." His exercise class builds strength—there really are older women doing military push-ups—but it builds something more subtle, something that clichés like "body awareness" try to capture.

I have swum competitively since I was six, and I still swim two miles four or five days a week. I also do push-ups and sit-ups. But I'd never done leg lifts until I find myself lying on my side in Ken Moody's class. In his good-humored, slightly teasing voice, Moody asks if we're ready for them. The regulars groan. Kenny, as his friends call him, explains that we should lift our top leg up and back, "as if you're drawing a diagonal line through the air." No problem. We keep doing them, with Moody counting our breathing, as he does throughout the entire class. (He is thrilled with how one student described his exercises: "breath-infused movement.") "You should be feeling some heat right around your hip joint," he says. I do, a little. Then he tells us to flex our feet—not point the toes, but pull them toward the shins, so they stick out like duck feet. I do that, and suddenly my hip joint really heats up.

Such subtleties have an unexpected benefit: "The longer you take the class the more difficult it becomes," says Maris/Semel, the woman who totes Moody's tapes all over the world. She has become much more conscious of all her muscles, she explains, and is constantly learning how relaxing or tensing them can affect the rest of her body. And, like several other old-timers, she says taking the class, which stresses spinal alignment, has helped her stand taller—literally. "I've grown two inches," she says.

Karen Wilkin, a former dancer who's now an art critic and curator, calls Moody's sessions "the best class since the School of American Ballet. All those other trainers can't motivate except by turning up the music. But Kenny works every part of you in an intelligent way." Noting that

Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* writer Margo Jefferson takes his class, as well as novelist Moore, Moody says, "I attract a lot of writers and intellectuals. It's such a wordy class—I throw out images and ideas, stuff they can wrap their brains around." He pauses. "There's a lot you have to think about in even a simple movement." ■

"Strength and Alignment" at Revolution costs \$12, \$110 for 10 classes, \$200 for 20; call 206-8785 for schedule. Moody also teaches at the Manhattan Plaza Health Club, 482 West 43rd Street, 563-7001. In the fall, he'll also be at David Barton Gym, 623 Broadway, 420-0507.

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